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ON PAGE 1

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Prophecy Fulfilled

A New Life in Israel for Ethiopians

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For as long as anyone could remember, the teachers and elders had been reciting the prophecy: One day, the black Jews of Ethiopia would be led back to Jerusalem, the city where Judaism had been taught to their ancestors, the descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

In early 1984, almost two-thirds of the Jews remaining in Ethiopia were told that the time of the prophecy was at hand, and 12,000 of them marched out of their homelands.

They were drawn not only by faith: A score of secret schemes over the previous six years had spirited 5,000 of their people to Israel. But now they found themselves trapped in refugee camps in Sudan, their presumed rescuers caught by surprise and seemingly paralyzed. They had begun to die at alarming rates.

The rescue effort was at a standstill. Officially, the Islamic government of Sudan was an enemy of Israel. The surreptitious methods previously employed to smuggle Ethiopian Jews to Israel were incapable of moving numbers so large. The governments of the United States and Israel, where concern was mounting, were stymied.

Then in September, 1984, an officer of the U.S. Embassy in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, came up with a plan to extract the Jews from Sudan. The man who devised it was a 46-year-old former college professor named Jerry Weaver, the embassy's refugee affairs coordinator. The plan came to be known as "Operation Moses."

Key Man Picked

In late November, it was ready to go. The Israelis set the time for the first flight—Nov. 20, at roughly 1 a.m. Mossad, Israel's intelligence

agency, had located a young Ethiopian Jew to whom they would entrust the key task of ensuring that those who came on the flights were indeed Jews. James, the man they chose, who cannot be identified further, arrived in Khartoum on Nov. 18.

James was slight, soft-spoken almost to the point of timidity, the son of an old Ethiopian Jewish family, whose name had been prominent among the community's leadership for generations. Now about 35, he had left Ethiopia years earlier, spent time in Djibouti and attended a university in France before going to work in a Swiss bank. James had never been in Sudan. To Weaver, he looked fragile.

Weaver and Christopher, his Sudanese aide, took him to the eastern Sudanese town of Gedaref, and on the morning of Nov. 19, James first entered the nearby camp at Tawawa where the Jews were staying. Weaver was nervous. The beginning of the airlift was just hours away. It seemed to him that for an operation of this importance, the key man should have been on the scene much earlier.

"He had never been there, no one knew him," Weaver said of James. "So he had to go in and introduce himself—'I am the son of . . . and I am here to take you out.' About 2 o'clock, he comes out and he says, 'I think I've made contact, and I think we'll have the people tonight.'"

Word Passed to Sudanese

Weaver passed the word to the Sudanese. The four buses rented to move the Jews from their camp to the Khartoum airport left a grimy, brick-walled warehouse where they had been hidden and were driven across an open field to the straw-roofed *tukels* (huts) at the southwest corner of Tawawa. It was 5 p.m. A cordon of security officers fanned out behind the buses.

James disappeared into the camp. Weaver climbed down off the bus and waited. Minutes passed and nothing happened—5:15 p.m., 5:20. Weaver grimly noted that the place they had chosen to wait was, in fact, a vast, open toilet. In the distance, Ethiopian refugees, squatting in the fields, stared in wonder.

"About 5:30," Weaver recalled, "I see a man, a woman and three little children come walking out, looking around, very cautious. I motioned for them to squat down, and they immediately squatted down and didn't move. Five minutes pass, 10 minutes pass. It's now 5:40. The sun's going down. Then I see, coming out from the huts—3, 4, 6, 10, 20, 30—I see a rivulet of people starting to come down."

"As they approach, I again motion for them to sit down. I'm not sure who these people are. I haven't seen James since he went into the camp, but people are really coming out now, in a steady stream."

Weaver stood by the closed doors of the first bus, not knowing

what to do. He didn't know whether the people who had appeared out of the camp were Ethiopian Jews or not, or if they were, which ones were supposed to be going. The plan had been to take out the vulnerable first—the sick, the old, the orphans. But at this stage, it looked impossible to sort out. Around him in the rapidly closing darkness were women with children, old men, hundreds of others, and they had begun to push forward, shoving and shouting.

James reappeared and pushed his way to the bus. Weaver, grateful to see him and watched as James tried to question the first five or six people to get on the bus.

But then a wail erupted from the waiting people as the first passengers climbed the steps, and the crowd pushed forward again. James was tossed aside—"like a stick," Weaver said. The Ethiopians tore at each other's clothes, tried to get through the iron bars on the windows, climbed on top of the bus. Weaver tore a stick away from an old man and began cracking people over the shoulders, pushing them back.

Convey on Wrong Road

"By now it is 6 o'clock and dark," Weaver recalled. "The Sudanese are nervous, I'm nervous, and obviously, the people getting on the buses are very nervous. By about 6:30, we have packed no-one-knows how many people aboard the buses, and we try to leave. People are running after us, total pandemonium. In the confusion, we take the wrong road. We are driving on a dirt track parallel to the Gedaref-Khartoum highway, but we can't seem to get to it. So we stop the caravan, turn the whole damn thing around and go back

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